

ICONS DESIGNED FOR THE DISPLAY OF SUMPTUOUS VOTIVE GIFTS

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In the 1950s the large and heavily overpainted icon *La Madonna della Clemenza* (164 × 116 cm) was moved from a chapel in S. Maria in Trastevere to the Central Institute for Restoration in Rome (Fig. 1). Later, C. Bertelli published the sensational results of the process of restoration.¹ It appeared that the icon was early medieval: the technique employed was encaustic (painting with wax colors), a procedure that seems to have gone out of fashion before A.D. 1000. The preserved parts of the surface testified to the fine quality of the work.

The icon depicts the enthroned Maria Regina and Child flanked by two angels. A donor kneels at the Virgin's feet, his hands around her shoe. The Virgin's right hand, raised in a rigid gesture, holds a golden cross. The figure is unusual in that it is obviously based on a standing prototype. Here this prototype was, with few modifications, remodeled into a seated figure, the knees thus acquiring an unnatural position. As pointed out by Bertelli and other scholars, the standing prototype of the Maria Regina appears in the central figure of Mary in the mosaics of Pope John VII (A.D. 705–707) in the old basilica of St. Peter; fragments comprising this figure are among those salvaged from these mosaics. Bertelli dates the icon to John's pontificate, a conclusion supported by the present author. The publication points to another aspect important for the chronology: the style of the icon, which with its "Impressionist" technique combined with strict outline has affinity to that of the frescoes ascribed to John VII in S. Maria Antiqua. Finally,

there is the paleographic evidence; the letters that appear in the inscription on the frame of the icon can be classified with those of the very same group of frescoes in the Forum church.² Thus Bertelli would seem to be on safe ground in identifying the donor at the Virgin's feet as Pope John VII himself, the pope about whom the *Liber Pontificalis* says: "Fecit vero et imagines per diversas ecclesias quas, quicumque nosse desiderat, in eis eius vultum depictum reperiet."³ His fancy for setting up pictures in which he had himself portrayed as donor is well documented. The portrait on the icon would seem to be the sixth portrait of that pope about which we possess information.⁴

The figure of John VII is important—but not decisive—for the conclusions reached below with regard to the iconography of *La Madonna della Clemenza*. These have mainly to do with the cross it includes or, to be more precise, with the curious absence of it. For, as shown by the restorers, the gold cross that the Virgin holds in her right hand is not part of the original painting. Painstaking technical analyses have revealed that the cross we see today was painted in tempera on top of the encaustic blue background.⁵ No trace can be found

²Bertelli, *Madonna*, 36 ff. C. Cecchelli was the first to see the remarkable paleographical similarity between these works when he attributed the icon to John VII, long before its cleaning; cf. his *Santa Maria in Trastevere*, Istituto di Studi Romani, Le chiese di Roma illustrate, nos. 21–32 (Rome, n.d. [1939?]), 154 f.

³*Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne (Paris, 1886), I, 385, cited by Bertelli, *Madonna*, 59.

⁴The other five are: (1) mosaic fragment in the Vatican Grottoes (destroyed by restoration ca. 1940–50); (2) fresco on main wall, S. Maria Antiqua; (3) fresco in doorway leading to Palatine Ramp, S. Maria Antiqua; (4) fresco on NW pillar of nave, S. Maria Antiqua; (5) fresco on facade of the Oratory of the Forty Martyrs, S. Maria Antiqua. For nos. 2–5 cf. P. J. Nordhagen, *The Frescoes of John VII in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome* (Rome, 1968), 42, 77, 80 f, 84 f.

⁵Bertelli, "Opera," 215, also *Madonna*, 71. The cross was repainted a second time, again in tempera (*ibid.*).

¹C. Bertelli, *La Madonna di Santa Maria in Trastevere* (Rome, 1961); idem, "L'opera d'arte," in "Il restauro della Madonna della Clemenza," *BICR* 41–44 (1964), 39 ff. The subsequent discussion is summarized in M. Andaloro, "La datazione della tavola di S. Maria in Trastevere," *RIASA* 19–20, 1972–73 (1975), 139 ff.

of an encaustic gold cross. The Virgin's raised arm and hand, however, are encaustic and original. Our inquiry will deal with this perplexing question. What was Mary originally holding in her right hand? The problem is by no means diminished by the fact that there are large lacunae in this particular area. Close to where the present cross appears, at the fissure between two of the wooden planks on which the icon is painted, the edges of the planks have disintegrated to form an oblong hole, resulting in a considerable loss of paint.

The material that tells us more than any other about the intense iconolatry of the period preceding Iconoclasm is to be found in S. Maria Antiqua in Rome. There, many of the wall paintings bear traces of having been venerated in the same way as the freestanding icon pictures were. Votive gifts and lamps were hung close to the frescoes and on them, as is proved by the number of holes of different sizes that are seen in the surface of the paintings. Solomone in the center of the fresco of the Maccabees, painted during the seventh century, once had a brooch, probably of precious metal, appended to her.⁶ Today nothing is left of this embellishment, but when the church was excavated in 1900–1901 four silver nails still remained in the holes where it had been attached.

The Mother of the Maccabees is on the great pier to the right of the entrance to the chancel. On the wall adjacent to this fresco there is a painting of St. Barbara. A number of nail holes on the wall around her show that votive gifts had been attached there, but the most interesting such traces occur at the corners of her mouth: holes from nails show that a sheet of metal, presumably gold, had been laid over her lips.⁷ In other words, she had a "mouth of gold." The same feature recurs also on the figure of the saint who stands as her counterpart on the other pier in front of the chancel. This is St. Demetrius, and he, too, is surrounded by numerous traces of votive gifts and has holes at the corners of his mouth.⁸ Roughly at the top of his halo there is a larger, deeper hole; this probably comes from a lamp hung there in order to throw light on his head.

There are similar marks left by lamps in several places in the church. One of them occurs on a

⁶P. J. Nordhagen, "S. Maria Antiqua: The Frescoes of the Seventh Century," *Acta IRNORU* 8 (1978), 117.

⁷Ibid., 121 and 141. The holes were first noted by Bertelli; cf. his "Icone di Roma," *Akten des XXI. Internationalen Kongress für Kunstgeschichte, Bonn 1964* (Berlin, 1967), 102 and note 6.

⁸Nordhagen, "S. Maria Antiqua: The Frescoes," 106.

fresco from the time of John VII, a Virgin in a small niche at the lower end of the nave. When this niche was repainted in the early eighth century, an older lamp (or large votive gift) that stood here was spared, and the fresco painters had to shear off one of the corners of the new fresco to avoid interfering with this object.⁹ Telling signs of similar practice are found on a fresco showing St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin, who stands with the Child Mary in her arms. This fresco, near one of the doors inside the chancel, was dated to the seventh century by Ernst Kitzinger, who with unfailing intuition suggested that it had deliberately been kept from being overpainted during the subsequent redecoration of the chancel walls.¹⁰ On technical evidence the present author was able to verify this thesis: the new layer of mortar applied by John VII's fresco painters extends to the edge of the earlier fresco but stops short of the actual painting. Its status as a valuable icon is proved by additional evidence. When the church was excavated there was a large, round hole in St. Anne's neck, just by the head of the Child Mary. This hole has since been filled with modern cement, but old photographs show it in its original state.¹¹ No doubt a lamp was hung here in order to illuminate the tiny figure of the Virgin in her mother's arms.

On the left pier in front of the chancel, on the side facing the nave, there is a badly damaged fresco representing a standing Virgin with the Child in her arms; it was painted in the seventh century by an artist who was a carrier of the advanced "Hellenism" which also put its mark on the Maccabees and Their Mother on the opposite pillar.¹² A feature that at once attracted the attention of scholars is the position of the Virgin's hands. She supports the Child in an unusual fashion, on crossed hands; her right hand grasps her left wrist, while her left hand hangs down, the fingers slightly curved (Fig. 2). As shown by N. P. Kondakov in his *Ikonografija Bogomateri*, the Virgin with Crossed Hands is a very rare version of the Madonna; the works that can be classified with this small iconographic group belong mostly to later phases of Byzantine art.¹³ So far the only known pre-iconoclastic examples are the fresco in S.

⁹Idem, *Frescoes of John VII*, 75 f.

¹⁰E. Kitzinger, "Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian and Iconoclasm," *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress, München 1958* (Munich, 1958), IV/1, 41.

¹¹Nordhagen, "S. Maria Antiqua: The Frescoes," 101.

¹²Ibid., 104 f (description), 139 (style).

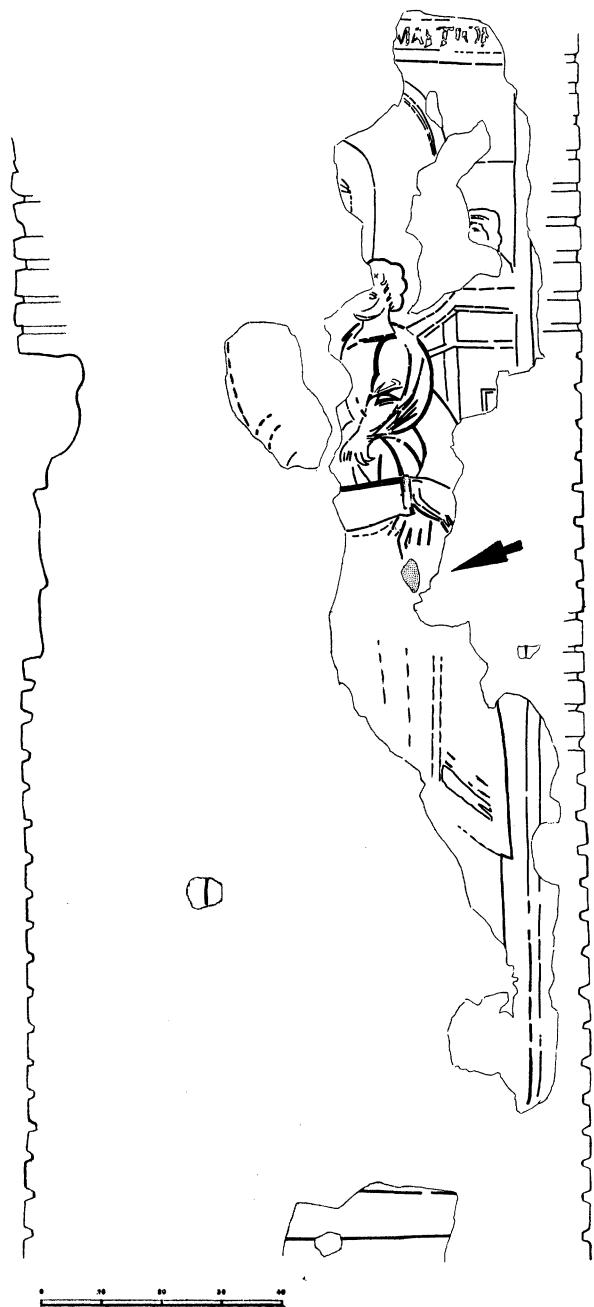
¹³N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografija Bogomateri*, II (St. Petersburg, 1915), 167 f.



1. S. Maria in Trastevere, Rome, La Madonna della Clemenza, encaustic icon, ca. A.D. 705
(photo: Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Rome)



2. S. Maria Antiqua, Rome, the Virgin with Crossed Hands, fresco,
ca. A.D. 650



3. S. Maria Antiqua, the Virgin with Crossed Hands, tracing. The arrow indicates the old surface repair (after Nordhagen, "S. Maria Antiqua: The Frescoes of the Seventh Century")



4. S. Maria Antiqua, the Virgin with Crossed Hands, reconstruction by the author. The appearance of the votive gift and the gesture of the donor are conjectural.



5. S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, La Madonna di S. Luca, icon, presumably early medieval, partly overpainted (after N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografija Bogomateri*, II [St. Petersburg, 1915], fig. 77)

Maria Antiqua and (possibly) the icon called La Madonna di S. Luca in S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, which is assumed to be either early medieval or modeled on a prototype close to that of the fresco (Fig. 5). The type is a variant of Mary Hodegetria, but the origin and meaning of the strange position of the hands is obscure.

As a result of the investigations in S. Maria Antiqua many years ago, the author could point to there being ancient damage to the fresco surface just below the left hand of the Virgin (Fig. 3). This damage, which affects a small, oval area, has been repaired with a lime mixture that corresponds most closely to that found in the frescoes of the seventh century; it is, in other words, entirely different from the modern cement used for all the repairs carried out since the excavation of the church.¹⁴ Reflecting upon the causes that underlie this early repair to the fresco, it seems natural to associate it with the phenomena discussed above, namely, the holes and scars that bear witness to the veneration of the frescoes and to the appurtenances connected with such worship—lamps and ex-voto objects. As measurements have shown, this representation of the Virgin with Crossed Hands has other distinctive features also. She stands slightly to the right of the central axis of the panel of which she is a part, probably because another figure, that of a donor, was standing next to her. Since the fresco is situated at a prominent place within the church, it is not idle to assume that the donor depicted here was a person of some standing, a pope or a high-ranking member of the imperial administration. Since, however, this donor is destroyed together with the entire lower left part of the panel, there is nothing to support further conjecture.

To sum up, several factors lead, in my view, to the conclusion that a costly votive gift once was displayed just below the left hand of the Virgin with Crossed Hands, where it was anchored to the fresco surface with a heavy nail. The object could have been a rosary, a necklace, or a chain, or some other precious object which, because of its position at this particular point, looked as though the Virgin was holding it in her hands (Fig. 4). Logically, this leads to the postulate that the type of the Virgin with Crossed Hands was created in response to a demand for such devotional devices, in other words, that it was designed for the purpose of exhibiting particularly fine and costly votive gifts in

such a way that it looked as though the Virgin had received them into her own hands.¹⁵ Obviously only the above icon in S. Maria Maggiore, where the Virgin holds her hands in the same position (Fig. 5), can help to prove or disprove this hypothesis. Once this icon has been subjected to a scientific laboratory investigation—and this seems unlikely to happen in the near future—the presence or absence of marks deriving from pendant votive gifts will, one way or another, be conclusive.¹⁶

Accepting this hypothesis, the next point arising is the question of the circles for which this type of iconography was developed. It would seem that this must have been a very exclusive form of art, developed for particular users, and therefore primarily reserved for the emperor or for the highest ranking among the clergy. We shall never know the identity of the donor standing by the side of the Virgin in the fresco we are dealing with here, nor whether he was connected with the court or the Church. But it seems likely that we have here a reflection of a ceremonial practice established for the most elevated strata of Byzantine society.

Unquestionably this is a line of reasoning that appears to end blindly. Yet, on returning to La Madonna della Clemenza discussed at the beginning of this article, it will be found that it carries with it a latent possibility of verification. There, as in the Virgin with Crossed Hands, it seems most likely that an actual object was displayed, one which had been added to the icon in such a way as to give the appearance of the Virgin holding it. The "missing" gold cross described above was probably a real cross of precious metal, nailed or strapped to the boards of the icon on a level with the Virgin's hand. If the kneeling donor is John VII—a theory for which there is considerable evidence—we also have corroboration for the assumption that this is a votive practice relating to the Byzantine hierarchy. In the works of art ascribed to him there are instances of his knowledge of both the repertory and of the rules of current official imagery.¹⁷ Icons

¹⁵ This theory was first outlined in my "S. Maria Antiqua: The Frescoes," 141 note 6.

¹⁶ It would seem from the old photograph of La Madonna di S. Luca that there is a nail with a large, irregular head in situ a little below the Virgin's crossed hands; cf. Kondakov, *Ikonografija Bogomateri*, II, fig. 77 (cf. my Fig. 5), but this remains to be verified.

¹⁷ On his use of the new official type of Christ introduced by Justinian II, cf. Nordhagen, *Frescoes of John VII*, 52 ff. See also J. D. Breckenridge, "Evidence for the Nature of Relations between Pope John VII and the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II," *BZ* 65 (1972), 364 ff. As to the "Stabkreuz" held by the Virgin,

¹⁴ As note 12 above.

of the type established here, where concrete objects are made to form part of the imaginary world of the painting, prompt many questions. If the above theories are tenable, we are confronted by an aspect of Byzantine aesthetics about which we know very little, an aspect that allowed of a far higher degree of transgressive illusionism than we would previously have thought possible. It is perhaps not incidental that the above examples of such illusionism all date from a period when Byzantine art drew strongly on that of Antiquity. The so-called "Hellenism" of the Early Byzantine period, a phenomenon brilliantly analyzed by the master to whom this volume is dedicated, exerted considerable influence when the above icons were created. Part of the nature of the "Impressionism" of the seventh century and the first years of the

eighth was a strongly illusionistic tendency. Perhaps it was due to this tendency with its element of make-believe that a synthesis between the real and unreal became feasible. It is a synthesis whose ruling intentions have still to be explored. Thus one might argue that the hanging of a rosary from the Virgin's hands, or the placing of a gold cross into her right hand, differs very little from the practice of covering her hands with sheet gold or crowning her and the Child with "real" crowns, features which both occur in later veneration practice. The present author feels, however, that there is a difference between the latter ways of "embellishing" icons and that displayed by our two early medieval examples, where objects of intrinsic cult value are united with the picture, thus endowing it with a new iconographical dimension.

Bertelli comments upon its role as an imperial *signum*; *Madonna*, 72.

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